

Learning from Tolkien about Life

The Lord of the Rings Revisited

by Steven Garber, Senior Fellow, C.S. Lewis Institute

“Tollers, there is too little of what we really like in stories. I am afraid we shall have to try and write some ourselves.”

At least that’s the way J.R.R. Tolkien remembers his conversation with C.S. Lewis. Dear friends that they were, Lewis affectionately called Tolkien by his nickname.

They in fact assigned themes to each other; Lewis would do something on space travel, while Tolkien was to take up time travel.

Amateurs at the craft of popular writing, Lewis’s effort grew into *Out of the Silent Planet*, but he had a horrible time finding a publisher. Tolkien’s try fizzled completely; he described it as having “run dry: it was too long a way round to what I really wanted to make, a new version of the Atlantis legend.”

Rather than being broken by the frustrations, they continued to talk and write together. Week after week they met in Oxford pubs to eat, drink, and read aloud the next chapters of their stories, asking one more time, “So, what do you think?”

Seeds of friendship

For years their faithful friendship amidst the push-and-pull of life has inspired me. Two professors busily engaged in their labors within the university, as well as having very full responsibilities at home and at church, choosing to listen and respond to each other, encouraging and stimulating each other as they



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learned to think carefully and critically—yes, to think Christianly—about the stuff of life. They were iron sharpening iron in the very forge of their vocations—something so rare, so unusual, and yet so important.

After each had found amazing acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic in the decades that followed, Tolkien observed, “And after all that has happened since, the most lasting pleasure and reward for both of us has been that we provided one another with stories to hear or read that we really like—in large parts. Naturally neither of us liked all that we found in each other’s fiction.”

Some sixty years later I am sure it would surprise them both to see the incredible popularity of their books; every good English-speaking bookstore in the world carries their stories of Ransom and Aslan, of Bilbo and Frodo. But as surprising as that would be to

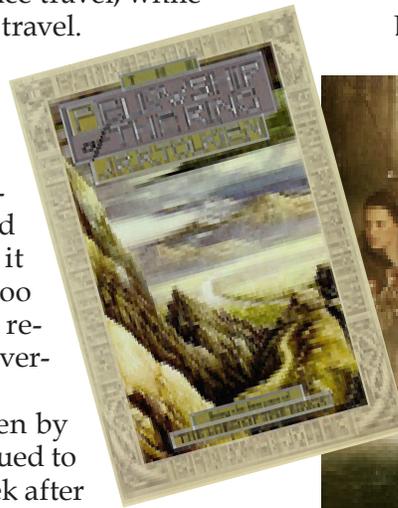
these two celebrity-shunning Oxford dons, it would be even more surprising for Tolkien to walk into the Borders bookstores of the Washington area and see larger-than-life, three-sided displays of *The Lord of the Rings* on sale. Bemused? Perhaps. Dismayed? Maybe.

And, God alone knows what he would think of the film.

Torn of heart

I must confess a torn heart about seeing Tolkien’s great story in celluloid. On the one

hand, I love film. Not only do I like to go to the movies, but also I believe they offer us important windows into the human heart. As the Institute’s longtime friend, the English educator and film critic Donald Drew, persuasively argued in his groundbreaking *Images of Man: A Critique of the Contemporary Cinema* (1974), movies both reflect and promote a society’s understanding of itself,



its hopes and dreams, its attitudes and aspirations, its glories and shames. He was right, profoundly so.

But believing that, I am still unsure what to do with my own images and visions of the hobbits, of Gandalf and Gollum, of Rivendell, as I contemplate the cinematic telling of the tale that has descended upon us in all of its commercial clamor. (How many conversations have you heard from your children or young friends about the dates for the new film, the DVD version, the music, and on and on? None of that is wrong in and of itself, of course.)

I have a very good friend whom I respect deeply whose favorite book is *Les Misérables*. He has read it, and re-read it. And it has profoundly nourished his understanding of what it means to be a human being living in this world—even of what it means to know God and his grace as it is incarnate in the richly written characters of Hugo's novel. For all those reasons, he refuses to see any film or theater versions of the story. He wants the images to be his and does not want London's West End or Hollywood to diminish or distort the characters as he knows them with the eyes of his own heart.

Though I have not made that choice about *Les Misérables*, I understand it.

A year ago when the news began to be full of stories of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy coming into our neighborhood theaters by winter, the film magazines were full of images of what "they" would look like. Now as we enter this second winter with its promise of the second film, again I wonder what I will do. Will my love of film win out, will my interest in popular culture draw me in? Or will I hold onto the Bilbo and Frodo that I have known now for thirty years, the ones who are my companions in the quest I have taken up?

You see, I do *know* them. Their furry-footedness helps me understand my clay-footedness. The lack of self-consciousness in their courage is inspiring to me. The steadfastness of their vision sustains me when I begin to falter. Time and again their love of home and hearth helps me remember why I love good cups of tea, comfortable chairs, fireplaces, and long conversations. Yes, I do have a torn heart here.

But even if I don't go, many others will. The theater-owners of the world are depending upon us, after all! And, since it is not a moral matter, but rather something more to do with aesthetic disposition, the theaters are likely to be full of Frodo's friends once again—though we do have to wonder at why Elijah Wood was cast in that role, as he does not look AT ALL like the real Frodo?! I am SURE you agree.

Don't leave your brains at the box-office

If you find yourself and your little ones drawn to the theater in the next weeks, then remember to bring your mind and heart with you. Donald Drew admonished us all: don't leave your brains at the box-office! Enjoy the story and the popcorn, but ask good questions too. Remember that someone is telling a story that shapes the moral imagination, and that the medium of the movies is very powerful. It speaks to us, calls to us, persuades us, both in ways we are aware, and in ways we are not so aware.

Stories are like that. Years ago, in the first days of Rivendell School—the K-8 school in Arlington, VA, where our five children have all gone—I remember the principal calling me one day to ask if I would write something for the school community about reading. In particular she was concerned about parental criticism over asking the students to read *The Hobbit*. How could that be? we wondered. After all, outside of Scripture, it was the story of our stories, the meta-narrative that made sense of our school's literature-based curriculum. (As you may already know, "Rivendell" arises out of *The Hobbit*, and is the place where the best songs are sung, the best stories are told, and the quest is formed. In Tolkien's own words, "Rivendell...was perfect, whether you liked food, or sleep, or work, or storytelling, or singing, or just sitting and thinking best, or a pleasant mixture of them all." Yes, a worthy name for a school.)

Well, the complaining parents had come to faith as adults, and wanted their children to be kept free from the dangers of the world; especially the ones they remembered as destructive in their own coming-of-age years. *The Hobbit*? Their only familiarity was that they used to sit around with their hippie friends smoking dope and reading Tolkien's tales of Bilbo and his adventures—*certainly not a good story for serious Christians*.

Stories of all sorts instruct the heart—for blessing and for curse. Jesus understood that, and mostly taught with parables, saying, "If you have ears, then hear." Shakespeare did too, and offered to the ages, "The play's the thing to catch the conscience of the king." More recently, the great American novelist Walker Percy argued, "Bad books always lie. They lie most of all about the human condition." He then proceeded to wonder about the worldview which nourishes the novel, maintaining that its narrative quality necessarily grows out of the Jewish and Christian view of human nature and history. Provocatively, he asked, "Have you read any good behaviorist novels lately...any good Buddhist novels lately...any good

Marxist novels lately?” teasing out his critique with each flawed understanding of human nature.

To go or not to go? I’ll bet most have gone and will go; and perhaps Tolkien himself would want it that way. But as we watch and wonder at this story become film, we ought to be instructed by Tolkien’s friendship with Lewis. They kept asking each other, “So, what do you think?” as they worked at exploring God’s world and discovering their place in it, writing stories and reading them aloud over the years. It is a far-reaching question, particularly as it speaks about the human condition. Is the story telling the truth? Does that matter to us? What consequences are there?

So what do you think? As we see movies, read books, listen to music—and take up family relationships, political responsibilities, and vocational commitments—it is a good question for us, too, to keep asking of each other, as we set out on the quests before us. They are no less treacherous than that which Frodo found, as he responded to the call that came to him.

The heart of Tolkien’s heart

If good stories are dependent upon the understanding of human nature and history that is rooted in the Jewish and Christian worldview, what would one look like? *The Lord of the Rings* is just that, and is at the same time one of the very best stories ever written.

Tolkien was a Christian, and saw his life and labor in the light of those commitments. His letters are probably the most interesting and accurate windows into his heart; we see his affection and cares for family and friends unfolded over the years, for the trials and pleasures in his vocation and occupation. In addition, he wrote essays in which he reflected upon his writing. Joining his good friends Dorothy Sayers, C. S. Lewis, et al. in a book of essays in honor of Charles Williams, Tolkien put it this way:

In God’s kingdom the presence of the greatest does not depress the small. Redeemed Man is still man. Story, fantasy, still go on, and should go on. The Evangelium [the good news of the gospel] has not abrogated legends; it has hallowed them, especially the ‘happy endings’. The Christian has still to work, with mind as well as body, to suffer, hope, and die; but he may now perceive that all his bents and faculties have a purpose, which can be redeemed.... All tales may come true; and yet, at the last, redeemed, they may be as like and as unlike the forms that we give them as Man, finally redeemed, will be like and unlike the fallen that we know.

Surely one of the most important reasons that *The Lord of the Rings* has such staying power, and has come into such prominence as a work of literature, equally satisfying both ten-year-olds and fifty-year-olds, is that Tolkien tells the truth about the human condition. In a letter to his publisher, Houghton Mifflin, in 1955, he wrote:

There are of course certain things and themes that move me specially. The inter-relations between the ‘noble’ and the ‘simple’ for instance. The ennoblement of the ignoble I find specially moving. I am (obviously) much in love with plants and above all trees, and always have been; and I find human maltreatment of them as hard to bear as some find ill-treatment of animals.

Those few words not only tell us of his understanding of people, and of what is to be prized, but also give us a window into his own deepest loves, which is the truest window into any human heart.

A story for our city

Tolkien’s tale is a story of the heart, after all, noble and ignoble as it is. Therefore, it is a story worth pondering always and everywhere, perhaps specially in a city like ours, capital city of the world at the dawn of the 21st century. Tempted as we are to false ambition and skewed aspiration, we can see and hear ourselves in the lives of Bilbo and Frodo; but it is the other hobbit, Gollum—the one who so horribly lost his way in the world of Middle-earth by distorting means and ends, by forgetting that good gifts are to be stewarded and not hoarded—that we must remember, too.

In our city of Washington—as in all cities, perhaps, but here it is to the n^{th} degree—we are prone to prize what is not worth prizing. It is hard to remember what matters. The push-and-pull of power creates a culture of cynicism about truth and reality, about what is really true and truly real. And so it is Gollum who instructs us in the end. What happened to him? Why did it happen? Simply said, he failed to guard his heart, and so perverted the meaning of the quest, and the meaning of his own life.

To remember Tolkien, sober words that they are, they are not despairing: as we work, with mind as well as body, we will suffer, hope, and die. May we be people who love what is worth loving along the way, remembering that real redemption is both now and not yet—even as we wrestle with the bentness that is inside of our hearts and that is all throughout the cosmos. It is a call, and a quest, worthy of hobbit and human alike.

If you find yourself wanting to understand more of what Tolkien intended, more of what is behind the sound and the fury of this Hollywood blockbuster, I suggest these resources:

Humphrey Carpenter, with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien, ed. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Houghton Mifflin, 1981.

Tom Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*. Houghton Mifflin, 2001.

Kurt Brunner and Jim Ware, *Finding God in The Lord of the Rings*. Tyndale, 2001.

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